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TAGS: [KPAO](#) [NL](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: DUTCH PRESS ON PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT TO THE US

11. Summary. The visit of Prime Minister Balkenende to the US received broad attention in the Dutch media. The fallout from the Madrid terrorist attacks and discussion of the opposition Labor Party's desire not to renew the Dutch military deployment in Iraq overshadowed his March 15 speech on transatlantic relations at the Princeton Theological Seminary. However, his meeting with President Bush and with UNSYG Annan received generally favorable treatment and portrayed Balkenende as a world leader - in contrast to his visit last September. Reports on the meeting with President Bush focused on their comments about the need for international solidarity on terrorism and on the extension of the Dutch mission in al-Muthanna. The press was pleased that the US understood the Dutch decision making process, that the President did not seek and the Prime Minister did not promise a commitment on extension right now. End summary.

12. Balkenende's Image: Much local coverage of Prime Minister Balkenende's first visit to the White House September last year, mocked the PM describing him as a "little boy visiting his big uncle," Journalists also misinterpreted the early morning time slot as an indication of the country's low status. This time, the White House meeting during regular office hours inspired remarks such as "Netherlands upgraded from economy to business class." The fact that this was Balkenende's second trip within six months merited comments such as "the Netherlands moved up from ranking with countries like Liberia to ranking with the UK." Despite these cynical remarks, overall coverage was more serious in tone than in September. NOS television said, for example: "Balkenende knows how to handle himself now".

13. The Photo Op: Most newspapers featured a photo of the President and Prime Minister together in the White House with headlines that read: "Balkenende continues solidarity with Bush"; "Bush calls for Dutch support in Iraq"; "Bush understands Balkenende"; "Bush and friend Balkenende speak about terror"

14. Iraq: Prior to the visit to Washington all media speculated on what Bush would say to Balkenende about extending Dutch troops in Iraq past the June 30 deadline for withdrawal. The issue had been a subject for discussion in parliament and the Prime Minister told them that he would not make a commitment. The press reported that Balkenende was true to his word and that Bush did not push too hard on the issue of Dutch troops in Iraq because "he understood the decision making process in the Netherlands." Other reporting on the Iraq discussion quoted the Prime Minister as telling Bush that he would welcome a new UN resolution that would justify the presence of foreign troops in Iraq. The press also picked up on Bush's message to the Dutch people in which he said: "I would like to ask the Dutch citizens to think about the Iraqi citizens who do not want people to withdraw because they want to be free."

15. Editorial Reaction: Thus far, there has been only one opinion piece on the visit of the Prime Minister to Washington, which ran in Algemeen Dagblad a leading quality daily (circ. 401,235). The writer explained how this visit differed from Balkenende's first one. He pointed out that the Prime Minister is positioning himself as a man who can build bridges between "difficult" Europe and the individualistic and sovereign America. He commented that Bush and Balkenende could use each other's support and that they both seemed contented at the end of their discussion. Balkenende was happy, the writer said because he has grown into his role on the world's stage and Bush was happy because he is losing allies, but still can count on the support of the Netherlands.

13. COMMENT: The recent attacks in Madrid meant the discourse in the press was serious and tightly focused. They quoted Balkenende's comments widely about standing shoulder to shoulder to fight terrorism. Another story competed for the headlines back in the Netherlands at the same time. Opposition Party leader Wouter Bos (PvDa) made news by insisting that Dutch troops should not be extended in Iraq,

this spawned a storm of protest on the editorial pages of the country's most influential newspapers tying his comments in with Spain's "appeasement" of terrorists.
Russel